

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 TUNIS 07382 291438Z

51

ACTION NEA-06

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R 291245Z NOV 74

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7569

INFO AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

USINT BAGHDAD

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY BONN

/AMEMBASSY RABAT 3811

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 7382

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PFOR EG SF OGEN

SUBJECT: VC-10 HIJACKING: TUNISIAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S

ASSESSMENT

1. FOREIGN MINISTER CHATTI INFORMED ME NOVEMBER 28, IN
RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION, THAT TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT WILL
DEAL WITH ELEVEN TERRORISTS IN MANNER CONSONANT WITH
TUNISIA'S "INTERESTS AND PRINCIPLES". HE SAID TUNISIA
IS A CIVILIZED COUNTRY AND WILL BE GUIDED ACCORDINGLY. AT
SAME TIME, HE CONTINUED, DECISION WILL BE AN EXCEEDINGLY
DIFFICULT ONE. HE CONFIRMED THAT ELEVEN TERRORISTS ARE
STILL IN TUNISIAN CUSTODY AND UNDER INTERROGATION.

2. WHEN I OBSERVED THAT GOT HAD GIVEN TERRORISTS NO
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PAGE 02 TUNIS 07382 291438Z

SOLID GUARANTEES, CHATTI TOLD ME CONFIDENTIALLY THAT

THIS WAS NOT THE CASE. DESPITE IMPRESSION TO CONTRARY FROM VOICE RADIO EXCHANGE BETWEEN MINISTER OF INTERIOR AND HIJACKERS, GOT HAD BY OTHER MEANS COMMUNICATED TO TERRORISTS ITS WILLINGNESS TO CAPITULATE TO TERRORISTS DEMANDS. THIS INCLUDED NOT RPT NOT TURNING TERRORISTS OVER TO PLO. I COMMENTED THAT, IN ANY CASE, UNDERTAKINGS MADE UNDER DURESS AND TO CRIMINALS SHOULD NOT RPT NOT BE CONSIDERED BINDING.

3. CHATTI SAID THAT TUNISIA HAD LEARNED SOME LESSONS FROM THIS EXERCISE. THIS WAS ITS FIRST HIJACKING EXPERIENCE, AND THUS TUNISIA WAS CAUGHT NAPPING WHEN HIJACKED PLANE APPEARED ON SCENE. NEXT TIME GOT WOULD HAVE PLANS READY TO PLACE OBSTACLES ON AIR STRIPS TO PREVENT HIJACKED PLANES FROM LANDING.

4. CHATTI SAID THAT GOT SUSPECTS POSSIBLE LIBYAN COLLUSION WITH HIJACKERS. GOT CONSIDERED IT LIKELY THAT LIBYANS DID MORE THAN MERELY REFUEL AIRCRAFT AND GOT IN PROCESS OF TRYING TO FIND OUT WHAT IF ANY OTHER MATERIAL ASSISTANCE LIBYANS MAY HAVE PROVIDED AT TRIPOLI. (ON OTHER HAND, HIGH-LEVEL MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OFFICIAL TELLS ME HE CONVINCED VC-10 NEVER OPENED ITS DOORS WHILE REFUELING AT TRIPOLI.) CHATTI STATED IT WAS CLEAR FROM THE OUTSET THE HIJACKERS INTENDED TO COME TO TUNISIA.

5. CHATTI INDICATED THAT GOT HAD BEEN PREPARED TO STORM AIRCRAFT IF ANOTHER PASSENGER HAD BEEN SHOT. HE SAID TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT HAVE TOLERATED FURTHER ASSASSINATIONS OF PASSENGERS. WHILE RECOGNIZING THAT NUMBER OF PASSENGERS WOULD HAVE BEEN KILLED IN STORMING EXERCISE, GOT FELT THAT IT WOULD HAVE HAD NO ALTERNATIVE UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES.

6. CHATTI SAID THAT THOSE TUNISIANS WHO WERE IN AIRPORT TOWER, INCLUDING BELKHODJA AND HIMSELF, WERE IN DANGER OF BEING WOUNDED OR KILLED IF AIRCRAFT HAD EXPLODED. MILITARY VEHICLES AND TROOPS WHO WERE STATIONED NEARBY WERE TOLD TO WITHDRAW FROM AIRCRAFT VICINITY, BUT TOWER, LOCATED NEAR AIRCRAFT, REMAINED EXPOSED.

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PAGE 03 TUNIS 07382 291438Z

7. COMMENT: CHATTI WAS CAREFUL NOT TO TIP TUNISIAN HAND RE DISPOSITION TO BE MADE OF TERRORISTS. CHATTI'S USE OF WORD "PRINCIPLES" (IN PARA ONE) SUGGESTS GOT WILL NOT RPT NOT LET TERRORISTS GO SCOT FREE. ON OTHER HAND, CONCOMITANT REFERENCE TO TUNISIAN "INTERESTS" LEAVES OPEN POSSIBILITY THAT GOT WILL, AS WE HAVE SUSPECTED (TUNIS 7321) TURN TERRORISTS OVER TO PLO FOR TRIAL. TUNISIAN OFFICIAL

WHO OCCUPIES POSITION CLOSE TO MINISTER OF INTERIOR
BELKHODJA HAS EXPRESS VIEW TO ME THAT TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT
WILL INDEED TURN TERRORISTS OVER TO PLO FOR TRIAL AND
THAT ANNOUNCEMENT TO THIS EFFECT WILL BE MADE TOMORROW,
NOVEMBER 30.
SEELYE

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